DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 582 PS 014 080

AUTHOR Nannis, Ellen D.; Cowan, Philip A.
TITLE Children's Understanding of Feelings: A Matter of Point of View.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (San Francisco, CA, April 27-30, 1983). For a related document, see ED 229 138.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Comprehension; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Emotional Experience; *Perspective Taking; *Research Methodology; Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Developmental Patterns

ABSTRACT

To refine methodology, a study was made of how 52 first-, third-, and fifth-grade boys and girls understood feelings in themselves and their parents. It was expected that older children would use more complex criteria than younger children and that differences would result from the number of points of view subjects had to consider to answer a given question. Questions about happy or sad feelings focused on three affective dimensions: process of feelings, interpersonal awareness of feelings, and multiple feelings. Composite scores were created by averaging scores on questions involving one, two, and three points of view. For each of the point of view composites, between-group analyses of variance for grade level and gender were performed; for each point of view, significant differences were found among grade levels, with third and fifth graders responding at higher levels than first graders. Boys tended to score higher than girls on tasks requiring taking one and two points of view. For every grade or gender, tests indicated that answers involving a single perspective or point of view invoked more sophisticated criteria than did answers involving two or three points of view. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED238582

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF FEELINGS: A MATTER OF POINT OF VIEW

Ellen D. Nannis and Philip A. Cowan

University of California, Berkeley

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ellen D. Nannis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 014080

Running head: Point of view

Presented at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, San Francisco, April 28, 1983.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF FEELINGS: A MATTER OF POINT OF VIEW

The study of how children understand their emotional worlds has focused primarily on children's awareness of the feelings of others (e.g., empathy) and children's understanding of the social conventions governing the displaying of feelings (Glasberg & Aboud, 1982; Saarni, 1979). Only recently have people begun to study how children think about their own feelings. Harter's (1980, 1979) well known research articulated the different ways children think about the experience of multiple feelings such as their ability to be happy and sad at the same time, theoretically linking children's explanations with their level of logical thought.

In studies initiated at about the same time as this one, Carroll (Note 1) and Tharinger (Note 2) interviewed children about their understanding of happy and sad feelings. Both found increasing sophistication with age in the level of children's understanding of their own feelings. The criteria invoked in the explanations of feelings ranged from the use of concrete, physical explanations, to the use of more internal criteria, to the use of psychological criteria in explanations.

A study by Harter and Barnes (Harter, in press) involved asking children to think about not only their own feelings, but those of another. Children's ideas about feelings in their parents were compared to their ideas about their own feelings. Harter and Barnes found that younger children assumed their parents felt what the children felt, while older children differentiated between their own feelings and those of their parents. This finding was explained in terms of children becoming less egocentric with age.

Although level of egocentrism is probably a major factor in children's ability to understand their own and other's feelings, it has not been taken into account in designing studies or in analyzing data. It has been assumed, for example, that questions such as "How do you know you are happy?" "How do you know your Mother is happy?" and "How does your Mother know you are happy?" are all of comparable difficulty for the child. Yet, on closer inspection, the three questions differ on the number of points of view the child is asked to take in order to understand and answer the question. "How do you know you are happy?" involves reflection on the self and thus necessitates holding a single point of view, that of the self. "How do you know your Mother is happy?" requries the child to reflect on another's state, thus necessitating taking a second point of view, that of the parent. Finally, "How does your Mother know you are happy?" asks the child to reflect on the criteria another would use to infer the child's state, thereby requiring awareness of a third point of view, that is, the child's awareness of the mother's awareness of the child's feelings.

We know that being able to take another's perspective is a benchmark in becoming non-egocentric and thereby represents a higher cognitive capacity than reacting from one's own perspective. It seems reasonable to assume that thinking about another's internal processes, or what has been called the third point of view, requires even greater cognitive capabilities.

Because of these distinctions, it appears that asking children about themselves and others requires different cognitive capacities. Therefore, in comparing how one thinks about one's own and other's feelings, one must control for the number of points of view implicit in the task or question presented to the child. Such a refinement in methodology is the focus of the present report.

In the current study, children were interviewed about their understandin of feelings in themselves and their parents. It was hypothesized that (1) within each point of view, there would be a developmental progression in response levels with older children's answers using more complex cirteria than younger children; and (2) that there would be differences in children's responses to questions about feelings depending on the number of points of view the child has to take in order to understand and answer the question. Questions requiring the child to take a single point of view would be answered using more complex criteria than those requiring two or three points of view; those questions requiring two points of view would be answered using criteria more complex than questions involving three points of view.

METHOD

Participants

Fifty-two children in one of three grades participated in this study: 6 boys and 13 girls were in the first grade (mean age 85 months); 9 boys and 9 girls were in the third grade (mean age 110 months); 7 boys and 8 girls were in the fifth grade (mean age 135 months). The children were primarily upper-middle class in socioeconomic background. They were recruited from a suburban elementary school on the West Coast.

Measures

Children's understanding of feelings was assessed using a modified clinical interview. Children were asked questions and their answers were followed up by the interviewer to clarify the meaning of the responses and to enable subsequent location of the response in one of the coding levels. The interview consisted of two parts: the first dealt with feelings experienced by the child; the second dealt with feelings experienced by the parents.

Interviews were conducted by an undergraduate student and one of the authors. The student interviewed one-third of the subjects in each of the three grades;the author interviewed the remaining two-thirds. Both interviewers were women trained in working with children.

Questions were categorized along one of three dimensions: (1) Process of feelings; (2) Interpersonal awareness of feelings; and (3) Multiple feelings. Each dimension reflected the content of the questions. Coding levels within each dimension were designed to allow for comparability among dimensions. In the present report, only the first two dimensions will be discussed.

Process of feelings. The Process of feelings dimension dealt with questions about general knowledge of feelings (e.g., How do you know you are happy?) and with how feelings "work" (e.g., How do you get to be happy?). Responses to question along this dimension were scored at one of three levels.

[Level 0: No codeable response.]
Level 1a: A feeling is a physical phenomenon. All explanations are based on physical manifestations.

Level 1b: A feeling is an external event or caused by an external event. Also at this level is a response of "yes" or "no" with no further elaboration.
Level 2a: Feelings are internal; they are felt in a specific part of the body, though not where they are expressed.
Level 2b: Feelings are an activity or caused by an activity.
Level 3: Feelings encompass all of oneself; they are an internal subjective, psychological process. Responses using psychological attributes or terms are scored at this level.

Interpersonal awareness of feelings. The Interpersonal awareness of feelings dimension concerned questions in which the child had to reflect on how others would make judgments about his/her own feelings or how the child would make inferences about another's feelings (e.g., How would I know you are happy? or Can your Mom and Dad hide their feelings?). Responses to questions along this dimension were coded at one of three levels.

[Level 0: No codeable response.]
Level 1a: Feelings always are communicated, they cannot be hidden. They are inferred on the basis of perceptual cues. One must see another or be in geographic proximity to know what another feels. Also at this level is knowning what another feels because of magic or mindreading.
Level 1b: "Yes" or "no" with no further elaboration.
Level 2: Feelings are experienced internally and are not visable, therefore, one could never know what another is feeling because one cannot see inside a person. Also at this level, feelings can be felt one place and expressed another; thus, they can be hidden if they are not shown. This does not imply that the child willfully can control his/her feelings.
Level 3a: There are interpersonal and intrapersonal differences in experiencing feelings. One may not know what another is feeling because people can feel differently about something. There is also a sense of willful control of one's feelings--they can be hidden. There may also be some recognition of universal rules about the display of feelings; for example, a smile usually means one is happy. Also at this level is the use of psychological attributes for identifying feelings in others (e.g., grumpy or nice).
Level 3b: Although one does not know what another is feelings, one may know as a function of empathy, sympathy, or closeness and familiarity with the person; that is, although not knowing another's feelings <u>per se</u>, these give one license or reason to infer another's feelings.

Interviews were coded by a rater naive to the research hypotheses. One-third of the interviews were randomly selected then scored by a second rater for the purpose of establishing reliability. Interrater reliability for each interview question was established. Coding was accepted as reliable if the raters were in absolute agreement at least 65% of the time and within one point at least 75% of the time. Table 1 presents the reliabilities for each question.

Table 1 about here

Procedures

Children were interviewed individually in a small, quiet area away from their classrooms. Interviews were done in two sessions, the first session lasting about 20-25 minutes and the second lasting approximately 15 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded for subsequent analysis. Children were asked a set of questions about happy feelings and then the same set of questions about sad feelings. The order of presentation was counterbalanced. For those questions referring to feelings about the parents, if the children's parents were divorced, children were asked about feelings in the custodial parent.

Scores for each question were composited into three variables: (1) single point of view; (2) two points of view; (3) three points of view. Each variable was comprised of the interview questions reflecting the number of points of view implicit in the interview questions. Figure 1 shows the questions used to form each composite.

Figure 1 about here

The composite score was derived by taking the average of the scores to the questions that formed the composited variable. Examples of questions from the single point of view composite included: " How do you know you're happy?" and "Can you hide you happy feelings?" Examples of questions from the two points of view composite included: "How do you know your Mom is happy?" and "How does your Dad get to be sad?" Examples of those questions within the three points of view composite were: "How would I know you're happy?" and "How would your Mom and Dad know you were sad?"

For each composite, questions referring to happy feelings and those referring to sad feelings were treated separately.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

T-tests were performed comparing anwers to questions about happy and sad feelings. No significant differences were found. Therefore, responses to happy and sad feelings were combined for all further analyses. Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the relatively small number of subjects, $p < .1$ was used to designate the level of statistical significance.

Developmental and Gender Differences

For each of the points of view composites, a between groups ANOVA for grade level and gender were performed. The results are in Table 2. For each of the points of view, there were significant differences among the

Table 2 about here

the grades levels: (single point of view, $F=3.8$, $df=2$, $p<.05$; two points of view, $F=3.0$, $df=2$, $p<.1$; three points of view, $F=7.2$, $df=2$, $p<.05$). The developmental trend showed that third and fifth graders responded at higher levels than first graders. For example, in answering questions about their own feelings (single point of view) a fifth grader may say "I know I'm happy because I'm playing and playing makes me happy" whereas a first grader might say "I know I'm happy because I have a smile." These findings are consistent with the person perception literature which indicates that children younger than eight years old (e.g., first graders) use fewer psychological terms and more concrete terms or attributes in their descriptions of others than do

children older than eight (e.g., third and fifth graders) (Livesly & Bromley, 1973).

No statistically significant difference was found between third and fifth grade students (8 and 10 year olds). The lack of difference was not attributed to a ceiling effect. On a possible 7-point scale, the mean of the oldest group was barely 5. The plateauing at ages 8 through 10 of response levels in children's understanding suggests that it is necessary to test older children.

Gender differences in children's understanding of feelings were not predicted by previous research (Carroll, Note 1; Harter, in press; Tharinger, Note 2). However, in the present study, boys scored significantly higher than girls in their responses to questions involving a single point of view ($F=7.1$, $df=1$, $p<.01$) and to questions involving two points of view ($F=12.9$, $df=1$, $p<.01$). Although there is some indication of gender differences in spatial perspective-taking (Coie & Dorvall, 1973) gender differences are not predicted by the literature on other aspects of perspective taking (Coie & Dorvall, 1973; Cowan, 1967; Finley, Solla, & Cowan, 1977). Despite this, it appears that boys tend to score higher than girls in identifying their own and other's feelings, tasks requiring taking single and two points of view.

An explanation for the gender differences may be drawn from the field dependence literature. Boys are more field independent than girls and thus tend to ignore the external surrounding cues when making a perceptual judgment (Witkin, Goodenough, & Karp, 1967; Vaught, 1965). Field independence has been positively correlated with success on certain social and physical perspective taking tasks (Finley, Solla, & Cowan, 1977). In the present study, boys' higher scores may be indicative of their using more internal criteria (field independence) rather than external, environmental cues (field dependence) in forming their ideas about how they know about feelings. That is, boys may refer to their internal "good feelings" rather than the more concrete cues such as whether they are smiling or whether they are engaged in a particular activity. Therefore, the current findings that boys and girls are using different cues in making judgments about feelings is consistant with the field dependence literature. If these differences can be attributed to differences in field dependence then boys' higher scores on thequestions requiring taking another's point of view is also consistant with the results of Finley, et al.

Point of View

A series of t-tests were performed comparing each of the points of view in order to test whether children's answers would differ depending on the number of perspectives or points of view called for in a question. Results of the t-tests are in Table 3. For every analysis by grade or gender, answers

Table 3 about here

involving a single perspective or point of view were higher and thus invoked more sophisticated criteria than answers involving two and three points of view. There were no significant differences in responses to questions involving two and three points of view.

It appears that the major transition that a child makes is that between taking his/her own perspective and that of another; that is, between questions involving a single point of view and those requiring more than one point of

view. It may be that the major cognitive task for the child is becoming non-egocentric and that after the initial task of learning to decenter, all related skills of perspective taking can be accomplished readily. Thus, the primary differences for the child may be in developing knowledge about the self and knowledge about the "other," regardless of the number of perspectives or amount of recursive thought that is involved in making judgments about the "other." This finding supports the notion by Cowan (1978) and Damon and Hart (1982) that self knowledge and knowledge about others may not develop concurrently.

It is more likely, however, that although self knowledge and knowledge about others develop differently, that there are also differences in the development of the knowledge about others. More probably, the lack of significant differences between the questions involving two and three points of view represents a plateauing in the level of responses. In light of the findings of Miller, Kessel, & Flavell (1970) about the development of recursive thought in children, one would assume that children would score differently depending upon whether they are referring to a single, two, or three points of view question. Miller et al found that the greater the number of people's perspectives that had to be considered in a task involving recursive thought, the less successful children were at any age in completing the task. These findings suggest the need to interview older children in future studies in order to demonstrate the full range of effect.

IMPLICATIONS

The present study suggests that the number of points of view children must take to form judgments about their own or other's feelings will have direct bearing on the level at which children respond to questions about feelings in themselves and others. Asking children about their own feelings will yield responses that are more sophisticated than responses to questions about others. Further, in talking about feelings in others, older children are more likely to invoke explanations based on more internal criteria than will younger children. For example, whereas fifth graders may say that they know their Mom is sad because she's grumpy and short tempered, first graders will probably invoke the more concrete criteria and say that they know she is sad "because she's got a frown." First graders do not make inferences in their judgments, they base their response on concrete physical evidence.

The findings also have strong implications for designing studies about children's emotional and social judgments. Additional care must be taken to control for explicit or implicit differences in the number of points of view in tasks or interview questions. Lack of gender differences in previous studies about children's feelings (Carroll, Note 1; Harter, in press; Tharinger, Note 2) may be because there were no systematic attempts to account for points of view implicit in the questions being asked of the children.

These findings provide additional support that self knowledge (single point of view questions) preceeds knowledge of others (two and three points of view) and begins to differentiate among different types of knowledge about others (two and three points of view) giving a broader perspective to what is involved in gaining knowledge about others.

It would be important to see the extent to which other forms of perspective taking (e.g., social perspective taking such as communication or physical perspective taking) relate to the ability to understand and infer feelings in the self and others. Such information may be useful in understanding the relation between social and physical knowledge.

Although there are no data in this study assessing the accuracy with which children make judgments about other's feelings, the gender differences found in this study provide some basis to speculate why the myth that girls are better than boys at recognizing feelings may be true. If girls have a greater tendency to use external or physical criteria in forming their judgments whereas boys' tendencies are to use internal criteria, one might assume greater accuracy in identifying feelings because one bases the judgments on visable, external criteria rather than on internal or inferred criteria. One needs to study the issue of accuracy directly, however,in order to validate this.

Finally, how children think about and understand their feelings is a new area of research with practical and theoretical implications. By understanding how children think about their emotional worlds we may gain greater insight into how they learn about and experience their emotional worlds. This knowledge can help us understand how children develop as emotional and social beings.

Practically, knowing that there are gender and age differences in how children think about feelings can help us communicate more effectively with children about their feelings and help us to understand more precisely their emotional experiences. For example, knowing that some children believe that feelings come only from actions, we should not be surprised if those children do not believe that their parents still love them when they are scolding them.

The findings suggest directions for future research. Gender differences should be replicated; older children should be interviewed in order to describe the full range of the phenomenon. Further, a cognitive-developmental approach to children's ideas about their emotional worlds may yield valuable information concerning the relation between cognition and affect. If we can describe and explain how cognitive abilities are associated with one's understanding and reaction to emotional situations, we may begin to understand the link between cognitive abilities and the experience of emotions.

Reference Notes

1. Carroll, J. Cognitive Development and the Understanding of Feelings. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Psychology, University of California, Davis, 1981.

2. Tharinger, D. The Development of the Child's Psychological Understanding of Feelings. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Education, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.

References

Coie, John D. & Dorval, B. Sex differences in the intellectual structure of social interaction skills. Developmental Psychology, 1973, 8, 261-267.

Cowan, P. Piaget with feeling. NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978.

Damon, W., & Hart, D. The development of self-understanding from infancy through adolescence. Child Development, 1982, 53, 841-864.

Finley, G., Solla, J., & Cowan, P. Field dependence-independence, egocentrism, and conservation in young children. The Journal of Genetic Psychology. ;977. 131, 155-156.

Harter, S. Developmental perspectives on the self-system. In M. Hetherington (Ed.), Carmichael's manual of child psychology: Volume on social and personality development. NY: Wiley & Sons, in press.

Harter, S. A cognitive-developmental approach to children's understanding of affect and trait labels. In Serafica (Ed.), Social cognition in context. NY: Guilford Press, 1980.

Harter, S. Children's understanding of multiple emotions: A cognitive-developmental approach. Presented at the 9th annual symposium of the Jean Piaget Society, May 31-June 2, 1979.

Harter, S. A cognitive-developmental approach to children's expression of conflicting feelings and a technique to facilitate such expression in play therapy. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1977, 45, 417-432.

Miller, R., Kessel, P., & Flavell, J. Thinking about people thinking about people thinking about....: A study of social-cognitive development. Child Development, 1970, 41, 613-623.

Saarni, C. Children's understanding of display rules in expressive behavior. Developmental Psychology, 1979, 15, 424-429.

Vaught, G. The relationship of role identification and ego strength to sex differences in the rod and frame test. J. of Personality,1965,7,271-283.

Witkin, H. Goodenough, D.,&Karp,S. Stability of cognitive style from childhood to young adulthood. J. Personality and Social Psych., 1967, 7, 291-300.

Table 1

Reliabilities

Questions:	% Perfect Agreement	% Within One Point
How do you know you're happy/sad?	68%	85%
How do you get to be happy/sad?	71%	80%
How would I know you're happy/sad?	76%	88%
Could you be happy/sad and I wouldn't be able to tell that you were?	82%	91%
How would your parents know that you were happy/sad? Could you be happy/sad and they wouldn't know?	71%	87%
Could you feel happy/sad feelings and not let the happy/sad feelings show?	82%	94%
Can you feel happy and sad about the same-thing?	82%	94%
Can you look happy and feel sad?	83%	94%
Can you show happy and sad feelings at the sametime?	71%	100%
Can you feel happy and sad at the sametime?	71%	94%
How do you know your parents are happy/sad?	69%	94%
How do they get to be happy/sad?	85%	88%
Can one be happy/sad and the other not know?	83%	97%
Can your parents be happy/sad and you wouldn't know?	84%	97%
Can either of your parents hide feelings from other people?	71%	88%

Table 1 continued

Pictures:		%Perfect Agreement
Self:	Happy	94%
	Sad	88%
	Both feelings together	94%
Mother:	Happy	94%
	Sad	94%
Father:	Happy	94%
	Sad	94%

TABLE 2

MEAN RATINGS OF POINTS OF VIEW COMPOSITES

	GENDER				GRADE LEVEL				
	BOYS N=22	GIRLS N=30	DF	F	1 N=19	3 N=18	5 N=15	DF	F
ONE POINT OF VIEW	5.0	4.4	1	7.1***	4.3	4.7	5.0	2	3.8**
TWO POINTS OF VIEW	4.4	3.7	1	12.9***	3.5	4.1	4.1	2	3.0*
THREE POINTS OF VIEW	4.2	3.9	1	1.3	3.5	4.4	4.4	2	7.2**

*P <.1

**P <.05

***P <.01

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF POINTS OF VIEW COMPOSITES

(BY GENDER AND GRADE)

	One point of view	Two points of view	I	One point of view	Three points of view	I	Two points of view	Three points of view	I
Boys N=22	5.0	4.4	4.1***	4.9	4.2	4.3***	4.3	4.2	.77
Girls N=30	4.4	3.6	4.4***	4.5	3.9	3.4***	3.7	3.9	1.13
Grade 1 N=19	4.3	3.5	3.6***	4.4	3.5	3.8***	3.6	3.6	.66
Grade 3 N=18	4.7	4.1	2.8***	4.8	4.4	1.8*	4.2	4.4	1.39
Grade 5 N=15	5.0	4.2	3.5***	5.0	4.3	3.7***	4.2	4.4	.78

*p <.1

**p <.05

***p <.01

FIGURE 1:

QUESTIONS USED TO FORM COMPOSITED VARIABLES

COMPOSITE	QUESTIONS FROM INTERVIEW
SINGLE POINT OF VIEW	HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU'RE HAPPY/SAD?
	HOW DO YOU GET TO BE HAPPY/SAD?
	CAN YOU HIDE HAPPY/SAD FEELINGS?
	CAN YOU FEEL HAPPY/SAD FEELINGS AND NOT LET THEM SHOW?
TWO POINTS OF VIEW	HOW DO YOU KNOW YOUR MOM/DAD ARE HAPPY/SAD?
	CAN YOUR PARENTS BE HAPPY/SAD AND YOU WOULDN'T KNOW?
	HOW DO YOUR PARENTS GET TO BE HAPPY/SAD?
	CAN YOUR MOM/DAD HIDE THEIR FEELINGS FROM OTHER PEOPLE?
	CAN THEY HIDE THEIR FEELINGS FROM YOU?
THREE POINTS OF VIEW	HOW WOULD YOUR PARENTS KNOW YOU'RE HAPPY/SAD?
	HOW WOULD I KNOW YOU'RE HAPPY/SAD?
	COULD YOU BE HAPPY/SAD AND YOUR PARENTS WOULDN'T KNOW IT?
	CAN ONE PARENT BE HAPPY/SAD AND THE OTHER WOULDN'T KNOW IT?